

Jane Sautière's Autofictional Explorations: *Nullipare*

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Jane Sautière's *Nullipare*, this author's second book, recounts the narrator's experience of being named "nullipare", nulliparous or childless, by a medical professional, and her ensuing reflection upon her decision.¹ As the author of three texts, Sautière is a relatively new name on the French literary scene.² Yet, her future seems promising. Her first work won two prizes and her texts are published by Verticales, which was owned by Seuil before its acquisition by Gallimard, and which has published works by authors such as François Bégaudeau, Chloé Delaume and 2014 Goncourt winner Lydie Salvayre. Sautière's delicate, crafted writing is comprised of self-reflexive vignettes that render snapshots of her life and of the lives of others in a highly descriptive, poetic and evocative style. She writes memories and reflections in a seemingly disjointed manner, leaving gaps that create a tone of nostalgia, loss or mystery. *Nullipare*, recounted by an unnamed narrator and referring to an unnamed character, is commonly referred to as a work of autofiction in critical literature. In this chapter, I examine the autofictional in Sautière's text, looking to the ways in which she manipulates this genre to create a portrayal of voluntary childlessness that insists upon tentative yet thorough reflection. I first survey current debates surrounding autofiction, then discuss how Sautière's text enters into dialogue with these.

¹ Jane Sautière, *Nullipare* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). Further references are given in parentheses.

² Prior to her three single-authored texts, she co-wrote a detective novel with Jean-Marie Dutey: *Zones d'ombre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

The label 'autofiction' continues to resist definition or consensus. A comparatively new moniker, it has turned from a fashionable, popular designation to something more divisive and even derided. Serge Doubrovsky famously invented the term, inscribing it on the book jacket of his 1977 work *Fils*. The inspiration for his innovative use of the autobiographical form was clearly Philippe Lejeune's taxonomy of 1975; in *Le pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune not only set forth the pact of narrator/character/author but also tabulated the distinctions between genres. In his writings and interviews on the topic of autofiction, Doubrovsky claims to support the triptych of the nominal identification of narrator, character and author, but departs from Lejeune's theorization by questioning the place of the truth. Whereas Lejeune claimed that autobiographical writing is distinct from fiction due to its truthful intention, Doubrovsky resists simple truth claims. Doubrovsky claims that the appearance of fiction in autobiography is nothing new and inscribes himself in a long line of autobiographers who have fictionalized parts of their narrative. Doubrovsky's distinction is that, in his texts, the non-referential elements are directly signalled.

Vincent Colonna took issue with Doubrovsky's form of autofiction in *Autofiction et Autres Mythomanies Littéraires*. Whereas Doubrovsky views autofiction as a means of arriving at a deeper understanding of the self, Colonna employs the term to designate texts that write a different version of a self; autofiction, then, is just another form of the autobiographical novel. By contrast, Philippe Gasparini in *Est-il je? Roman Autobiographique et autofiction* (2004) emphasizes the fictional in autofiction. Importantly, he finds that it is unnecessary to identify the author, narrator and protagonist as the same name. Instead, he proposes that there are many ways that the relationship between author and character can be established, such as age, occupation or aspirations (24-25). For Gasparini, autofiction should aim for

vraisemblance by pushing the fictional element to its limits and insisting on the distinction between the author's life and her/his narrative of it.

Autofiction thus finds itself in an awkward place, yet hopefully the genre will be recouped as part of a continuum of literary innovation. For E. H. Jones, the promise of autofiction lies in the manner in which it brings dominant socio-critical developments, such as the experience of psychoanalysis and the constructed nature of selfhood, to bear upon first-person narrative. In terms of Sautière's writing, such an approach to selfhood, based upon flawed memory, doubt and incompleteness, is one of the hallmarks of her texts. Literary critic Pauline Vachaud underscores that Sautière's writing is not fictional and proposes instead the label "recueil testimonial à valeur littéraire" (105). Anne-Martine Parent calls this text simply "un récit autobiographique" (n.p.) and she and gender theorist and psychoanalyst Laurie Laufer both read the narrator's voice as a direct transposal of that of the author. While I do not dispute Parent's attribution, I find that the text is not strictly autobiographical but instead constitutes a crafted manipulation of the sub-genre of autofiction in order to represent the specificity of this author's experience of voluntary childlessness. This text is shot through with metaphors of doubt. By doubt, I do not contend that the narrator doubts or regrets her decision, and in case the reader were in any doubt over whether it were a decision, she writes pointedly of her "refus de la maternité" (62). Yet, the tone of Sautière's text is one of ambiguity; I argue here that *Nullipare* shows a narrator who doubts her reasons and, in particular, who doubts the validity of the narrative that she has forged of them.

Autofictional *Vraisemblance*

The first word of *Nullipare* is ‘je’ and the short section that acts as its preface is highly intimate in tone. During a breast cancer screening examination, the professional but distant nurse and radiographer label her as “nullipare” on the form that they are completing. Previously unaware of the term, the narrator writes “le mot me frappe, me blesse, me suit dans ma journée, comme les toutes petites coupures qu’on se fait avec une feuille de papier, qui saignent beaucoup, et qui nous gênent au-delà du vraisemblable” (12). Sautière’s text thus begins with an intimate, confessional admission of her feelings of loss and solitude. The medical establishment is at once presented as cold, distant and more interested in labelling patients than listening to or understanding them; as Laufer writes, “son choix, son désir ne sont ni entendus, ni même écoutés, ils ne peuvent devenir, selon la logique de la violence performative médicale que souffrance psychologique” (147). From the outset, the narrator strikes a tone of intimacy with the reader, awarding her/him glimpses into private events and into the private thoughts that these arouse in her. Furthermore, this reference to a potentially fatal disease, breast cancer, coupled with the metaphor of the cut, bleeding finger are the first of several metaphors that present nature as dangerous and destructive. Such warnings of the body as a source of pain, danger and death emphasize the narrator’s fragility, thus forging a more intimate bond between reader and narrator, and also prefigure the tragic tale of her family. The intimate, confessional tone of this narrative voice thus draws the reader into this tale and invites her/him to suspend disbelief and read this text as revelatory to some degree of the author’s identity.

And this intimate first-person narrative voice proceeds to convey an array of information that corresponds to established facts about Sautière’s life. Whereas Doubrovksy claims that autofiction is predicated upon the tripartite identification of

author, narrator and character according to the terms of Lejeune's pact, Gasparini argues that identification between character and author can be determined in a number of ways. In *Nullipare*, the narrator is an author, she is recently post-menopausal (Sautière was 56 at the time of publication), she was born in Tehran, she worked in the prison system, she is voluntarily childless and she has moved through a succession of countries and cities. Moreover, the narrator insists upon this correspondence in the opening pages. When the narrator is described as "nullipare," she first hears "nulle" and equates it with "nulle part" and the idea of lack of belonging, writing "une femme de nulle part [...] je me demande s'il existe un mot semblable pour designer un homme qui n'aurait pas d'enfant" (13). Faced with the adjective "nullipare," the narrator immediately connects this lack with her lack of origins. She writes firstly of the loss of her homeland, having been born in Tehran and having made frequent international moves. She lists the places that she has lived, including cities in Iran, France, Cambodia and Lebanon, including snippets of information about each place: "La Garonne-Colombe, l'arbre avait grandi" (18) for example. She describes them in terms of a static image that she recalls about each one, creating a melancholic tone and encouraging sympathy for this solitary woman who belong nowhere, nulle part. Throughout, Sautière's autofictional narrative voice implies that this is revelatory of the author's own painful situation. Yet, as I show here, she draws parallels between her identity and that of the narrator but uses autofiction to cast doubt over her identity as a voluntarily childless woman.

Voicing Doubt

One of the main narrative techniques discernible in Sautière's work is the way in which she manipulates the narrative voice to inscribe doubt into her text. She

never names her narrator, thus leaving questions over the reference to her own identity. Instead, she peppers her text with motifs of uncertainty and instability. An example of this is how she represents the fact of having lost her mother tongue. Her *nourrice*, whom she calls her “mère d’adoption” (26) spoke Farsi to her and she states that “c’est sans doute dans la perte de cette langue que je persiste à ne pas me consoler d’elle” (26). The label “nullipare” thus leads to a realization of loss on several levels, from geographical to ancestral to linguistic. As an example of the effect that this has upon her, the narrator recounts having met an Iranian artist at the Venice biennale and regrets being unable to speak to her in her native tongue. She writes:

Evidemment je commence par lui dire que I am born in Téhéran, you know, and when I lost my nurse, I don’t want to speak any more farsi. C’est court une vie quand on a peu de mots. Oh, what a sad story, me dit-elle, et les larmes, inattendues, me montent aux yeux. Not so sad story, I become to write cause this story (29).

This sudden multilingual narration, the fact of discussing a lost language (Farsi) in another language (English) through the language of the narration (French) hints at the instability of the narrator’s voice and of her writing position; her voice could have been very different had she not lost her first language and the self-narrative that would have eventuated would have varied considerably from the one that we are reading. This plurivocal, multilingual narrative voice thus increases the doubt of this autofictional text, reminding the reader that there is again no stable, complete, unflawed identity discernible to this writing subject.

As is evident in this citation, this narrative voice usually narrates the vignettes in the present tense. Doubrovsky in an interview with Michel Contat contends that

“ce qui fait l’autofiction, c’est un fait très précis: tout est écrit au présent. Et ça, c’est une fiction absolue. [...] Cette espèce de présence du présent est je crois la signature même de l’autofiction. Si on lit un récit autobiographique, il est au passé” (245).

Sautière follows a similar pattern to that stipulated by Doubrovsky, inscribing most of her vignettes in the present tense. As a consequence, Sautière’s text emphasizes that it is created, that it is an artifice that is connected to an identity, but only loosely. The immediacy of the narrative voice will also resonate with the reader, who is further drawn into this intimate text; the present tense eliminates the temporal gap between the event and its written record, conveying the intimate thoughts of the narrator as though she were experiencing them in the present time, as we are reading them. Yet the reader is also aware, as Doubrovsky indicates through the expression “c’est une fiction absolue,” that one cannot trust or blindly believe this narrator or this author, since the present tense serves as a metaphor for the way in which her memory recalls the isolated images and vignettes, which is necessarily incomplete, unstructured and incorrectly ordered. Doubt is therefore pervasive in this text as Sautière is clearly intent on emphasizing the unknowable in terms of her self and her story.

One of the rare instances in which the narrator breaks from the present tense has a particular significance. In this vignette, the narrator reiterates the reasons that she has given for not becoming a mother in the past and comments upon how these have changed over the course of her adulthood. She writes that she would at first state “j’aurais été une mauvaise mère” (62). Then she would respond “j’aurais été une excellente mère de schizophrène” (63) and later “je n’aurais jamais pu supporter une grossesse, quelque chose qui pousse en moi, quelle horreur!” (63). Finally, she settles with “j’ai dit ensuite qu’étant moi-même très folle, il ne fallait pas que j’enfante” (63). She clearly feels obliged to have an answer, a public response to the

question that the reader does not hear in the text but that is often asked of voluntarily childless women; a woman who decides to bring a life into the world is rarely called upon to justify her choice, whereas a woman who decides not to is. Stigma is something of which childless women frequently complain in research interviews, as they are perceived in ways that they do not recognize by the childbearing majority. Sociologist Caroline Morrell even quotes one woman who deflected the awkwardness of the question by replying “Oh yes, we had kids but we sold them so we could travel” (57). What is striking in Sautière’s case is that her public answer has become an open admission of her perceived inability to mother responsibly through struggles with anorexia and psychological trauma, and she is not afraid to admit it. Such a rupture in the narrative, the usage of a tense that stands out from the rest of the text, testifies to the fact that she has spoken with a different “I” over time; the “I” that she used as a young woman who claimed she would be a bad mother is not the same as the “I” who stated that she should not procreate due to her own madness. In this way, the narrator emphasizes that her identity is not static or unmuted and that there is a difference between her narrating “I” and her narrated “I”s. By pointing to the way in which her I has changed over time, she further highlights that this narrative is permeated with doubt. Although she moves out of the present tense of autofiction, then, she does so in a way that increases the doubt over her identity in narrative.

Vignettes of Doubt

The form of this autofictional account, the fragmented vignettes that each allude to facets of the narrator’s life in a disjointed, disconnected way, further the doubt that forms the fabric of this text. Disjointed narrative characterised by fragmented text and even fragmented sentences is a leitmotif of autofiction. In an

interview on the site “Littérature contemporaine sur Internet,” Sautière describes her technique thus: “Le fragment s’est imposé d’emblée. Il fallait ce blanc entre ces mots compacts, il fallait un moment de vide et de silence. Je ne pouvais pas écrire autrement. Mais c’est aussi l’espace du lecteur, là où je ne suis plus que dans le silence” (n.p.) As Sautière indicates in this citation, such a form imposes gaps between the vignettes, creating blank space that breaks the narrative and signals a rupture in the narrator’s thoughts or memories. Not only does this insist upon the incomplete, flawed nature of identity and memory, but these gaps invite the reader to enter the text. At these points, the narrator moves to the side and the reader’s active interpretation of the silences is necessitated. Since the topic of these vignettes is her decision not to have children, this use of the fragmented vignettes invites the reader to question her decision. She gives us snapshots that give an ambiguous view of her decision and we are invited to ponder the gaps between them.

Several vignettes tell the story of Sautière’s mother, but interestingly, the mother’s story only appears in the second section of the text. The narrator thus avoids opening the text with the premise of her mother’s tale. Instead, *Nullipare* is resolutely about her and her story, pointing to several reasons why she chose not to have children and avoiding the charge that it was simply because of her mother. Sautière explains that her mother had married a man who had been diagnosed with tuberculosis at a time at which this was incurable and gave birth to two children who were “promis à la mort” (47). The correlation between birth and death is clear, and one understands that Sautière has been raised with the notion of child-rearing as a source of not just sacrifice or difficulty but of tragedy and loss. Parent sees the reason for Sautière’s decision not to procreate as “la nécessité de mettre fin à une filiation malsaine, mortifère” (n.p.). This is certainly partially the case. Yet this is hardly the

only reason for Sautière's choice; she recounts her family history then moves beyond it to recount a variety of reasons behind her decision. One of the most striking qualities of Sautière's text is her desire to tackle her past, to take ownership of her "nullipare" body and to record both the advantages and the disadvantages of her childlessness. Laufer argues that the result of the normalising discourse of which "nullipare" is part is that "cette femme va devoir trouver les raisons de ce choix" (147) and that Sautière feels "l'obligation de psychologiser son choix... Elle fait de sa vie une explication de son absence d'enfantement, fille d'une mère endeuillée, aux enfants morts." (148). It is true that Sautière appears to want to explore the reasons for her childlessness in this text. Yet she also refuses to give an explanation by using the sub-genre of autofiction to create doubt over her reasons. These are many, the reader infers, and they are ambiguous and overlapping. And all the while, s/he is reading them within a tale that is partly fictionalised; the reader does not know when the autobiography takes precedence and when the text becomes fictional, as Sautière's brand of autofiction hints that both fact and fiction are present but creates fluid, indistinct boundaries between them.

Sautière thus subsumes the story of her mother within other elements of her story and among other reasons for her childlessness. Again, the pervasive mood of the text is the doubt that she feels over the source of her choice and how she should recount it. The narrator even alludes to the doubt of her narrative and of her decision not to mother in a particularly direct vignette. She writes:

Pourquoi dire cela: 'je sais', alors que rien n'a été comme cela, rien n'a été su, ou révélé. [...] Non, je n'ai rien su 'un jour.' J'ai, au fil du temps, créé mon histoire, donné une continuité aux faits et aux épreuves surmontées, constitué

un récit, tandis que la houle, le chaos dont je suis issue reste préhistorique, sans rapport à une histoire (90).

Here, then, she alludes to the narrative of her autofictional self and to the way in which she does not know herself. She underscores that her mother's tale affects the way in which she configures her relationship towards mothering, but claims that this history is part of 'prehistory,' far removed from her own life and choices. Moreover, she is clear that there was no one single moment when she realised that she did not want children. Instead, she presents this as a gradual process that is rooted in self-invention – "j'ai, au fil du temps, créé mon histoire" – rather than in any specific moment of rejection of motherhood. At the end of this short, pithy vignette she simply states, "j'ai inventé ma vie, comme tous" (90). The fragments, and particular the gaps between the fragments, thus point to a lack of certainty – not over her decision not to mother, but in the reasons for her lack of desire to do so.

Sautière is clearly intent on probing this doubt, however. In one vignette, the narrator writes openly of the feelings of loss that she experiences at not having had a child. She admits that she had been tempted to become a mother in the past, but her reason is presented as wanting to please a male partner, not as wanting a child; "J'avais, à cette époque, arrêté toute contraception et j'étais très amoureuse. Rien n'avait été formulé d'un désir d'enfant, ni par lui, ni par moi, ni même silencieusement dans un désir à peine construit. J'étais dans le vide d'un passage à l'acte" (105). She represents this as akin to sleepwalking but interrogates this attitude in the present. For example, asks herself:

Est-ce que quelque chose me manque? Je suis tellement liée à ce manque que je ne sais plus. [...] Je pourrai rêver longuement. Je ne le fais pas. Non pas

pour économiser une souffrance, ou pour éviter d'agiter en vain un rêve
démonétisé. Je ne le fais pas parce que toutes mes rêveries sont cramées. (71)

The loss that she feels is tangible in this passage but this is not presented as regret; something that could have been simply is not. What she is most clear about is that she *does not know*. Sociologists Gayle Letherby and Catherine Williams underscore the fallacy of the stereotype according to which all childless women have decided definitively not to become mothers and highlight instead the ambivalence that many women experience (720). Sautière's case is similar, yet she is clear throughout that the loss in her life is multiple, that it would not be remedied by a child, and that a child would in no way fill the gaps that lie in her history and identity.

Sautière thus constantly refuses any clear, complete and unambiguous representation of her childlessness. As a corollary, she insists that although her choice not to mother is purely voluntary, she has experienced maternal feelings in different circumstances. For instance, she experiences something akin to maternal emotions with her dying mother, in a role reversal that positions her as the mother figure and the degenerating mother as the helpless child; as the mother becomes senile and reverts to speaking her native Breton, the narrator becomes "sa fille, mais aussi sa mère [...] la mère d'une enfant au bord de la mort" (92-93). Similarly, she writes of her maternal feelings towards the prisoners with whom she works: "ces détenus devenaient des enfants qu'il ne fallait pas que je prenne dans mes bras [...] ceux-là, du maternel, comme nous tous, ils ont en besoin. Mais la mère, ils en ont peur" (76). The relationships that she develops with these inmates suggest that she is anything but a cold, unfeeling woman who is psychologically deficient, yet she is clear that she is not attracted to the prospect of having children of her own.

In addition to claiming her own maternal role in other relationships, the narrator describes other mothers whom she has known, undoing the stereotypes of the quintessentially happy, natural earth mother who finds ultimate fulfilment in her child and creating a metaphor of doubt over maternal experience. Sautière writes of the mother living next door to her, who has recently had a child and who is confined to her home space. She imagines the woman's life as she hears sounds through the walls and wonders about the effects of solitude upon her. She comments "parfois je l'imagine très heureuse, entièrement prise par la disparition de soi" (40) in a phrase that hints that sacrifice is inherent to motherhood. Furthermore, in a vignette introduced by the line "il y a ce qu'on me dit" (53), the narrator lists comments that she has heard other mothers make about their children. This long paragraph consists of a litany of complaints, running on from each other with no punctuation like the desperate words of a breathless, exasperated individual. Beginning "tu as de la chance, oui, de la chance de ne pas en avoir" the paragraph includes phrases such as "j'ai l'impression d'être une matonne [...] j'ai honte d'aller voir les profs [...] je sais pas s'il n'est pas homo [...] j'ai tout le temps peur qu'il aille en taule" (53). The following page simply reads "il y a ce qu'on me dit au bout de très longtemps d'amitié et de silence. Je n'aime pas mes enfants. Je regrette de les avoir eus. Ce sont des secrets de pierre tombale" (55). Sautière in this way seems intent on portraying motherhood beyond stereotypical discourses and does so by citing mothers themselves. Suffering, regretful or desperate mothers may not be celebrated in society, but are nonetheless strikingly present. Psychologist Barbara Almond in *The Monster Within* writes that "it is amazing how much of a taboo the negative side of mothering carries in our culture, especially at this time" (xiii). Again, Sautière

amasses metaphors of doubt in this text, showing that a positive experience of motherhood is far from assured.

Overall, then *Nullipare* is predicated upon the doubt that the narrator experiences over her narrative of non-mothering. Her autofictional narrative voice casts doubt upon the validity of her memories and identity, and her fragmented narration points to the uncertainty and instability of her story. What the narrator *is* clear about is that she has never really *wanted* to be a mother. She is sure of her refusal but does not necessarily have a neat, coherent explanation for it; as she comments in one vignette, “A quoi bon chercher les pourquoi?” (67). And her text proclaims that here is nothing wrong with this. *Nullipare* indicates that voluntarily childless women should not feel compelled to explain themselves in logical argument in accordance with any normalizing discourse. Likewise, it hints that there all sorts of reasons not to have children and that each voluntarily childless woman’s motives will vary. The frequent metaphors of nature in this text highlight that there are many forms of feminine nature and that there are indeed many forms of non-maternal feminine nature. Françoise Héritier has written forcefully against a unitary form of natural, maternal instinct and Colette Guillaumin has critiqued ‘nature’ as deployed ideologically to harness women to marriage and reproduction. In *Nullipare*, Sautière proclaims that her own nature is allusive and inexplicable to her and that it does not correspond to a complete or coherent narrative. Her autofictional experiment thus shows that doubt and uncertainty may pervade one’s self-narrative but that there are very good reasons to be proud and forceful of one’s doubt.

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